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THE EFFECTS OF INFECTIOUS
DISEASE ON NAPOLEON'S RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

by

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER	ii
PREFACE.....	iv
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Composition of Forces	4
The Real Threats	5
ACROSS THE NIEMEN	12
Smolensk	16
Borodino	22
MOSCOW	28
The Russian Strategy.....	31
So What?	33
CONCLUSION.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY	40

Preface

This research topic seemed an interesting one for me as I have an undergraduate degree in microbiology. I have always been fascinated by the power that microorganisms have and their ability to adapt to changing conditions. Especially important to the military are the ever increasing number of diseases that are developing resistance to treatment. This intent of this paper is to show the importance of understanding the role that microorganisms play in the use of military force around the globe.

The National Command Authority has committed U.S. military forces to all parts of the world. Most recent deployments included places like Somalia, Haiti, and Liberia. These countries, not unlike Russia was to Napoleon, are lands that contain diseases that U.S. service member's immune systems are not familiar with. In most cases, as with Yellow fever, Typhus (which is still prevalent in these countries), Malaria, and others, the U.S. military can take precautions that will prevent epidemics from occurring in the ranks. With some diseases though, this is not possible. There is no vaccine yet for AIDS, and the deadly Ebola virus has proven elusive to scientists as well. The problem with these type diseases is that one can not plan for when they will occur and with what virulence they will strike.

Also, the ability of bacteria to mutate and develop resistance to current medical remedies (antibiotics) poses a similar dilemma to planners because they can not possibly predict what changes will occur, nor when an outbreak will happen.

Abstract

This paper will discuss the effects of infectious disease on Napoleon's forces during the Russian campaign of 1812. In short, it will argue that the primary reason Napoleon failed to defeat the Russian army was because his forces were decimated by disease, specifically typhus, dysentery, and diphtheria. It will also demonstrate the affect of disease and illness on Napoleon's judgement and decision making process. This subject, infectious disease and the military, has great implications for military planners in the future. The recent Gulf war and its related "Gulf War Illness" is just one example. The United States has lost more men to disease during war than any other cause, hence it is critical that today's and tomorrow's military leaders are aware of the dangers. The scope of this paper is bounded by the Russian campaign timeframe, but it will concentrate on the march to Moscow; specifically the events that occurred upon entering Polish and Russian territory. Also, there were two major battles fought prior to reaching the gates of Moscow which this paper will show were the two decisive points in the campaign. These battles occurred at Smolensk and Borodino, and they illustrate key instances where Napoleon's leadership, judgment and decision making come into question, not only by historians and authors, but by several of Napoleon's own generals. The paper will be broken down into three main chapters; chapter one will include the introduction and describe the three main infectious disease threats, and an estimate of the composition of forces that Napoleon started with so as to show the numbers of men killed or

incapacitated by disease, and a short discussion on hospital/medical facilities. Chapter two will emphasize the period of time between the French forces entering Poland and first encountering the deadly typhus, to when the remaining army reached Moscow. It will give accounts of Napoleon's actions at Smolensk and Borodino and will outline the losses caused by disease. Specifically, it will show that Napoleon himself was weakened by sickness and this affected his judgement and his ability to conduct the campaign in a successful manner. He failed to press the advantage at Borodino even after repeated attempts by his Generals to convince him to commit his Imperial Guard to defeat the almost beaten Russians. Borodino, it could be argued, was the first Waterloo for Napoleon. After that battle, he would never again reach the strength he then possessed.

Chapter three will discuss the events leading to the occupation of Moscow and the French departure. It will also discuss Russian strategy, and the applicability of infectious disease to today's military leaders.

The Russians were outnumbered in the summer of 1812 and were forced to play a fight and retreat game with Napoleon's army. This was not well received by the Russian people who were suffering at the hands of the French invaders, but it was just about the only sound course of action the Russians could pursue. The situation turned itself around however when Napoleon reached Moscow and stayed there until an orderly and safe retreat was nearly impossible. At this time the Russian winter was upon them and they had neither the will nor the supplies to return to France.

The effects of disease upon Napoleon and his Army were too much even for the great General to overcome. He could not foresee the decimation, but he could have altered his plans after it began to take hold of his army.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The enmity that existed between Russia and France was not so strong as to warrant an invasion from Napoleon. After the Battle of Friedland in 1807, Napoleon and Alexander I signed the treaty of Tilsit. Napoleon treated Alexander I at the negotiations almost as if he was a friend. He imposed no harsh penalties on the vanquished Russian leader except that he join the Continental System. This involved Russia siding with the French and basically isolating Britain. The only casualties incurred by Russia were those inflicted financially on the elite Barons who sold merchandise, such as timber, to the British. The new agreement forbade Russia from dealing commercially with Great Britain but it did not take away lands from Russia nor did it impose any war indemnity. It could be said that this was a “friendly peace.”¹

The Prussians on the other hand were dealt with harshly by Napoleon. He took back the Polish lands from Prussia and created the Duchy of Warsaw hoping to resurrect the Kingdom of the Poles. The rest of the Prussian lands he divided among his constituents. He created the Kingdom of Westphalia and placed his youngest brother Jerome as its ruler. He also enlarged the Duchy of Berg under Murat’s care and made it a Grand Duchy. He then forced Prussia to join the Continental System and burdened them with a war indemnity of 140,000,000 francs! To say the least, Napoleon made Prussia a quite

reluctant and resentful ally.² This would become an important point during the Russian campaign of 1812, as a portion of Napoleon's force was Prussian.

The events leading up to Napoleon's invasion of Russia would not seem to be cause for war, but to Napoleon, they were. The alliance between the two powers took a blow when Napoleon asked for the hand of the Tsar's sister, Catherine.³ Alexander did not want this union to take place so he had Catherine marry the King of Wurttemberg. Napoleon, undeterred, later requested the hand of Alexander's younger sister Anna who was only fourteen. Her mother viewed Napoleon and the alliance as pure evil and the engagement was prevented. Napoleon took this as a negative sign and before he even received a reply from Alexander, he asked for the hand of Marie-Louise the daughter of the Emperor of Austria. This time Napoleon was successful in securing a bride but this engagement drove a wedge between the Franco-Russian alliance.⁴ Another point of contention was the annexation of Oldenburg, which was in direct violation of the Treaty of Tilsit. With the defeat of the Austrians at Wagram in 1809, Napoleon was able to position troops in Prussia, a position far from its own frontiers. Alexander took exception to this because he wanted Prussia to regain its full independence.⁵ Napoleon of course, had no such ideas, and the tensions mounted between the two powers.

Poland was another sore spot between France and Russia. The Poles sided with Napoleon thinking that he would be their protector and help them build a free and independent state. They had reason to believe this would occur at Tilsit where, he established the Duchy of Warsaw. When Napoleon was calling for recruits, the Poles provided 30,000 men for the *Grand Armee*.⁶

The straw that broke Napoleon's back though, was the Russian refusal to comply with the Continental System. The Tsar saw the system as economically damaging to Russia and to his popularity.⁷ The Russian upper class was feeling the pinch of restricted trade with countries outside the system and Napoleon looked at the Russian policy of allowing "neutral" shipping into its ports as a failure to comply with the agreement. According to Napoleon "without Russia, the Continental System is an absurdity."⁸ It is at this point that Napoleon decided it was time to use force to coerce Russia back into the fold. Napoleon felt that "a single blow delivered at the heart of the Russian Empire, at Moscow the Great, at Moscow the Holy, will instantly put this whole blind, apathetic mass at my mercy. I know Alexander. I once had influence over him, and it will come back."⁹

The time had come, in Napoleon's eyes, for Russia to be punished. Before he began his campaign though, Napoleon did his best to tie up loose ends so that he could focus on the Russian problem. He tried to end the war in Spain by offering peace terms to England.¹⁰ The caveat that prevented it from happening was Napoleon's demand that his brother Joseph be placed as king there. Also, Napoleon failed to gain Sweden or Turkey as an ally, in fact, Sweden sided with Russia due mainly to Napoleon having invaded that country for its failure to maintain the Continental system. Turkey had signed a peace agreement with Russia ending their long war and freeing Russia's southern border. This allowed the Russians to concentrate on the French forces while Napoleon still had some 300,000 troops in Spain. It was a prophetic Admiral Decres, who declared in June 1812, that "He (Napoleon) will not return from this war; or if he does return, it will be without his army."¹¹

Composition of Forces

Napoleon's grand strategy was to mass such an overwhelming force that he could deliver a single crushing defeat to the Russians. With that in mind, he would amass the largest force to date, that had ever been seen in European history and certainly the largest in Napoleon's experience. Marching 1200 miles through Russia would require a large portion of troops to guard the supply depots and cover the flanks of the Main Army. Depending on what sources one reads the French crossed the Niemen, the river separating Russia from Europe, with somewhere between 320,000 and 600,000 troops.¹² Connelly described the French forces as fielding an Army of 611,000 men which included replacements and a large percentage (greater than 50%) of non-Frenchman.¹³ Also, there was a contingent of reserves from the French Rhineland and Germany which numbered 130,000. Thus, the highest total number of men in the Grand Army is 740,000. This force also included some 2,000 guns and over 250,000 horses and was made up of several nationalities including, German, Polish, Italian, Lithuanian, Swiss, and approximately 50,000 reluctant Prussian and Austrian forces.¹⁴ The fact that there were so many non-French forces played an important role in the defeat of Napoleon because of their lack of knowledge of Napoleon's campaign practice of foraging.

Alexander could not match these numbers even with his southern frontier free from threats. The best estimates of the Russian strength were approximately 450,000 men, the majority of which had never seen combat. In fact, estimates showed that only about 130,000 Russians were combat veterans.¹⁵ An important note, Russian forces would have been even smaller had the Tsar not signed the treaty with Turkey and Sweden and freed up some 60,000 troops from Turkey and 30,000 from Finland.¹⁶

Napoleon's army was divided into 3 main components; the main army led by Napoleon consisted of approximately 250,000 men, the south army had roughly 80,000 and was led by Jerome Bonaparte, the mid-army also had 80,000 men and was led by Eugene de Beauharnais. The north flank was guarded by MacDonald's 30,000 troops combined with Wartenburg's 20,000 Prussians. The south flank was protected by 30,000 Austrians under von Schwarzenberg. If these numbers are correct then Napoleon had a fielded force of 490,000 men. This would not include the support forces and the reserves left on the south side of the Niemen.¹⁷

Opposing these forces were the main Russian army, 130,000 strong led by Barclay de Tolly and almost half that of the French main force. The south force consisted of 50,000 men under Bagration. And further south (and not really a factor) were 40,000 men under Tomassov. This was the best the Russians could muster at the beginning of the campaign, but they had something the French did not; home-field advantage. The Russians had the luxury of raising forces while Napoleon was on the march. They also had room to maneuver, which they used to great advantage, and they had the ability to pick and choose when and where to fight. Such were the two opposing forces gathering to do battle in the summer and winter of 1812 in the land of the Tsars.

The Real Threats

Most writers agree that Napoleon's greatest strength, as with most military leaders, was in his subordinates. His contribution to military tactics was minimal. He relied on mass and maneuver vice any great strategic or tactical plan.¹⁸ It was the same in Russia, although here, he hoped to crush the rebellious Russians by overwhelming them in one great battle and issuing peace terms from the Holy City of Moscow, the center of the

Eastern Orthodox Church.¹⁹ Napoleon had made detailed plans for the invasion, he would have had to in order to get such a large force that far from home and still be militarily strong when it came time to fight. The problems started well before first contact with the enemy. They started in Poland with an outbreak of what was known as "campaign disease" or typhus.

The famous military author, Carl von Clausewitz, wrote that Napoleon crossed the Niemen with 301,000 troops in his main army. By the time he reached Smolensk 52 days later, he had only 182,500 men remaining which means he lost about 105,000 men,²⁰ or over one-third of his army. This was due solely to sickness and stragglers; the stragglers being those who would soon become sick.

Typhus, along with dysentery and diphtheria, were the three major medical threats faced by Napoleon and his forces. Typhus was by far the greatest factor during the Russian campaign and began wreaking havoc on Napoleon's forces soon after they crossed the Niemen. Typhus comes in many forms and is caused by a microorganism called *Rickettsia prowaseki*. This class of *Rickettsia*, named after two scientists who died trying to isolate and investigate the organism, is different than the commonly known typhoid fever which is caused by a waterborne bacillus bacteria. Typhus is known as the campaign disease because it is carried and spread by body lice which live and breed in the dirt and in the nooks and crannies of buildings as well as dirty clothes. These were the conditions that greeted the Grand Army in Vilna.²¹ It is not too hard to see that the conditions favorable to the spread of the disease; people living in crowded conditions, wearing the same clothes for an extended period without washing them, and not bathing, were readily apparent in the Grand Army's living conditions.²²

Typhus is a name given to three different types of infectious disease, they are epidemic louse-borne typhus (the type experienced by Napoleon's army), the Brill-Zinsser disease, and the endemic or flea-borne typhus. The first type, the epidemic louse-borne typhus, is also called the European or classic typhus. It was the type most common to Europe and is the most virulent of the forms. It commonly sprang up during periods of war and anytime that unsanitary conditions were encountered. Other names for it were jail fever, hospital fever, camp fever, and ship fever.²³ These names give away the reason the disease prevailed in those places, they were usually crowded, dirty places.

The symptoms of this form of typhus are fairly common to many diseases. They appear about 10 days after infection and include high fever, muscle pain and joint stiffness, headache and delirium. About 5 days after the onset of symptoms, a red rash develops on the trunk and spreads to the rest of the body. In the second week delirium sets in and after this the patient either recovers promptly or dies. The mortality rate is usually between 50-70% in the second week of the disease's course.²⁴

The disease is so virulent that approximately 150,000 soldiers were killed by it during World War I.²⁵ Finally during World War II the use of DDT and vaccinations reduced the number of cases dramatically and with the advent of antibiotics in 1948-49 the disease could be effectively treated. Another form, which may have also been present in Russia in 1812, is the Brill-Zinsser form of typhus.²⁶ In this form, caused by the same organism, victims who have recovered from the epidemic typhus serve as carriers of the disease and transmit it from them to other victims. Also, this type may be spread by someone coming into physical contact with a carrier. Fortunately, this form is less virulent than the epidemic form.

The final form is the endemic, or flea borne form of the disease. This is caused by another organism *R typhi* and it is relatively mild. It is also known as urban typhus or shop typhus.

The second greatest infectious disease threat faced by Napoleon and his Grand Army was dysentery. This was an acute form of diarrhea and could lead to death if not treated properly. This disease infected the large intestines of humans and would cause the victim's stool to become very watery and most often contain blood and/or mucus. Another debilitating symptom was the severe abdominal cramps brought on by the disease. There are two types of dysentery; amoebic dysentery and bacillary dysentery. *Entamoeba histolytica* is the causative agent of amoebic dysentery and may be found in many regions of the world including any temperate areas.²⁷ The conditions that lead to this type disease are unsanitary conditions such as those found in the Grand Army.²⁸ Also, and this is important, it is spread by contaminated water or uncooked food or from carriers. A primary vector for the disease is flies spreading it from the feces of infected people to the food supply.

Bacillary dysentery is caused by a bacteria from the genus *Shigella* and because of its ability to spread, outbreaks can occur anywhere in the world. This form of the disease is not as virulent as the other form but transmission is similar. It is spread through flies which feed off the feces of infected individuals and then transmit it to the food eaten by healthy individuals. The primary treatment of this disease is replacing lost body fluids.²⁹ This was important to the Grand Army because in most instances there was no supply of fresh water, thus compounding an already deteriorated situation.³⁰

The third threat, and the least of the three, was diphtheria. This disease is highly contagious and caused by *Corynebacterium diphtheria*. It attacks the upper respiratory system after it enters the body through the oral cavity or nose. It incubates in the mucus membranes and attacks the central nervous system and the heart by releasing a toxin. This organism can cause death and the symptoms appear approximately 5 days after infection. The organisms create a false membrane which may block the airway and require surgery to correct. Of course, there was no such capability in the Grand Army's medical facilities.³¹

It is important to note that there are many avenues that a disease can take to infect the human body. Infection itself is defined as the contamination of the body by pathogenic organisms. From the above passages, it is clear how some organisms enter the body. They enter through the mouth and nose after being transported on particles or water vapor in the air.³² They can also enter through the urinary tract (sexually transmitted) and the gastrointestinal tract (raw or undercooked meat) or through the skin, especially injured skin, as in the case of typhus.³³

Resistance to infection will be lowered if the body is in a weakened state, as in the example of the French forces who exerted great physical effort marching 20-30 miles per day and subsisting on very little. Also, severe burns and malnutrition have detrimental effect on the body's ability to resist disease. Wounds incurred in battle were invitations for infection and Napoleon's medical facilities were ill equipped to handle them. He and his staff had seemingly prepared for every detail, but from the outset, the medical facilities were lacking. The hospital corps were severely deficient, "the hospital trains set out short of even the most basic medical stores, consequently dooming...many sick and

wounded soldiers to unnecessary deaths. Right from the beginning ill-health was to beset the mighty army. Diphtheria, dysentery, and typhus, soon aggravated by malnutrition and semi-starvation, would take a heavy toll. To cite one instance, the Bavarian Corps lost one-half its strength before it ever made contact with the enemy.”³⁴

Notes

¹ Chandler, David G. *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, New York, MacMillan Co., 1966, p732

² Chandler, p 728

³ Chandler, p 729

⁴ Chandler, p 729

⁵ Chandler, p 730

⁶ Chandler, p 730

⁷ Chandler, p 731

⁸ Brett-James, Antony, *1812. Eyewitness Accounts of Napoleon's Defeat in Russia*, New York, St Marten's Press, 1966, p 5

⁹ Brett-James, p 6

¹⁰ Brett-James, p 7

¹¹ Brett-James, p 7

¹² Connelly, Owen, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns*, Wilmington, Delaware, Scholarly Resources, p 148

¹³ Connelly, p 149

¹⁴ Connelly, p 150

¹⁵ Connelly, p 159

¹⁶ Connelly, p 161

¹⁷ Connelly, p 165

¹⁸ Chandler, p 233

¹⁹ Chandler, p 718

²⁰ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret New Jersey, Princeton Press, 1976 p 323

²¹ Brett-James, p 32

²² Brett-James, p 34

²³ Microsoft-Encarta Encyclopedia, 1996

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Brett-James, p 32

²⁹ Microsoft-Encarta, 1996

³⁰ Brett-James, p 35

³¹ Connelly, p 130

³² Microsoft-Encarta, 1996

Notes

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Chandler, p 758

Chapter 2

Across the Niemen

On 24 and 25 June, Napoleon's forces crossed the Niemen river into Poland¹. Almost immediately the army was "attacked" by typhus. According to Major, "Poland was filthily dirty."² On 26 June, Vilna was captured without a fight, yet Napoleon suffered severe casualties in the form of disease and fatigue of both men and horses. Napoleon relied on Murat's cavalry to set the pace for his army. This was his first mistake. Murat had no idea how to care for the infantry or the horses³. Napoleon's forces relied on foraging and scavenging to survive. Murat's pace not only killed hundreds of horses, it prevented the army from gathering much needed food and water. The King of Naples (Murat) was a very brave officer, but a poor leader of soldiers⁴. Before the army reached Vilna, there were 10,000-20,000 horses dead (depending on which statistics one reads) and the supply wagons lagged far behind⁵. Also, "the soldiers, swollen with insect bites which plagued them day and night, suffered from bad water or thirst- horses died by the hundred...and one officer counted 1,240 corpses in the space of five leagues between Kovno and Vilna- at every march hunger, diarrhea, and dysentery laid men low."⁶ These conditions were brought about by drinking polluted water. Hospitals were set up at Konigsberg, Danzig, and Thorn, but the multitude of sick overwhelmed them. Napoleon accepted these losses rationalizing that he would soon

meet the Russians and destroy them in one decisive battle⁷. What Napoleon failed to realize, or more likely it appears, failed to concern himself with, was that only a small portion of his forces were experienced campaign soldiers used to the hardship of foraging for food. This small percentage possessed the required discipline to embark on such an arduous campaign, but the majority of his army did not, especially the non-French units. It was not long before the less experienced began to straggle and discipline fell apart. It was the actions of these stragglers that turned the local peasants, the ones whom the French viewed as the newly liberated from Russia, against the French⁸. They would pay dearly on the return trip from Moscow for these actions.

The army was suffering from a new and terrible sickness. It came in the form of high fever, red rash, and pale color. Many of those infected died relatively quickly, it was the scourge of typhus that had settled in on Napoleon's army⁹. Typhus was endemic, that is, ubiquitously present, in both Poland and Russia, but the French had never encountered this disease, at least not in the form it was about to experience. Napoleon's Chief Surgeon, Baron D. J. Larrey, had developed an outstanding medical and sanitary system for the army, but even he was not prepared for the onslaught with which he was to come face to face. He did not know the cause of the disease so he could not develop preventive measures and the already dwindling supply of potable water made matters even worse¹⁰. An important point discovered at Vilna by the soldiers was that as they were accustomed to living off the land and getting what they needed from the locals, they found that the Poles did not dress as they did¹¹. This may seem insignificant but it proved critically important to the French because they had no fresh linens to obtain from the Poles and because of this they were required to keep and wear their clothes for extended

periods. This only helped spread the disease as the lice made their homes in the seams of the dirty clothes. At night, the men huddled together for mutual support in fear of an attack by the Russians or Polish civilian reprisals¹², in doing so they only increased their chances of contracting the disease as the lice that thrived in the hair, on the bodies, and on their clothing, moved quickly from person to person. A passage from an eyewitness account, described the prevalence of lice and included the following:

Bourgogne went to sleep on a reed mat in the village of Dorobogoni and was soon awakened by the activities of the lice. Finding himself literally covered with them, he stripped off his shirt and trousers and threw them into the fire. They exploded like the fire of two ranks of infantry. He could not get rid of them for two months. All of his companions swarmed with lice; many were bitten and developed spotted fever (typhus).¹³

The end result was that the Grand Army left Vilna to search for the elusive Russians and left behind 8,000 sick, dead and dying and not a shot had been fired. Most of the casualties were due to typhus¹⁴.

Many of the commanders in Napoleon's army made it clear that their forces were weakened and in need of rest and replenishment. General Erasmus Derooy, commander of the 19th division sent a message to Napoleon describing the conditions under which he was marching. In it he told of the many swamps that they should have gone around yet were forced to wade through for expediency¹⁵. He also reported that "the number of my sick in the infantry and artillery is very considerable. Medicines have to be purchased, and they are almost unobtainable."¹⁶ For this reason he was losing more and more of his force to stragglers, because of the pace of the march they could not stop and regroup. He also made the point that the soldiers had received no pay, as nobody had, and that the "food is bad, and the shoes, shirts, pants, and gaiters are now so torn that most of the men are marching in rags and barefoot. Consequently, they are useless for service."¹⁷

Another consequence, was that in this condition, those soldiers were ripe to become victims of typhus and dysentery. In fact, one Bavarian General, the group hardest hit by typhus, estimated he was losing 900 men per day due to exhaustion, dysentery, and desertion¹⁸.

Other reports showed that the constant threat of attack from Cossack units kept the men on duty almost round the clock. This combined with the wet and cold weather produced widespread sickness which resulted in more and more soldiers being left behind. Major Heinrich von Roos, a senior doctor described a river crossing by his regiment. He stated that "we came to the River Dvina in a pouring rain... For several days we had not been dry, and now such a cold bath was pleasant for nobody, all the more so because we were in a sickly condition."¹⁹ The sickness was beginning to wear on the morale of the French soldiers as well, for when they would visit the hospitals, they would find the sick and dying unattended.²⁰ This coupled with the knowledge that every Russian was being called upon to resist the French in every possible way, and the fear of what would happen if they were defeated by the Russians drove morale into a major ebb.²¹ So, before Napoleon had fought any decisive battle his army was being reduced to a shadow of its original form by disease and the morale and esprit de corps of his force was quickly evaporating. Again, von Roos described the effects of diarrhea on his forces. This was caused by drinking bad water and he had little or no medicine to give. The treatment consisted of drinking a tea made from peppermint or chamomile among other types of tea. If this wasn't available, then tincture of opium or Hoffman's drops (a mixture of alcohol and ether) were issued. During severe attacks a thick soup or broth

was administered which seemed to have good results, the problem was that there was not enough of it and many had to suffer with no relief.²²

Smolensk

When Napoleon realized that he was going to have to seek out the Russians, he picked up his headquarters and moved deeper into Russia. He was sure that the Russians would stop and fight at Vitebsk but they did not.²³ Napoleon rested his troops for 15 days at Vitebsk from 29 July to 12 August. He gave orders to his medical officers to improve the food supply and hospital service for his troops. One of his medical personnel Fezensac wrote "it is not enough to give orders; the orders must be capable of execution."

²⁴ Just prior to entering Vitebsk, the first major fighting took place in Ostrovno. Nothing was decided by the fighting, but Napoleon's forces suffered more from disease than from battle. According to Major, "at the time of the Battle of Ostrovno , in the third week of July, over 80,000 men had perished from sickness or were too ill for duty. Disease alone had robbed Napoleon's central force of nearly a fifth of its effective strength by the end of the first month; his army was about 150 miles from the frontier and Moscow was 300 miles away."²⁵

On top of the deaths to disease, the Grand army, by the time it reached Vitebsk was at two-thirds strength due to a combination of hunger, thirst, fatigue and the elements according to Connelly. Chandler writes that "by the time Napoleon reached Vitebsk, perhaps 100,000 of his men were absent from their units through sickness or straggling."

²⁶ Upon leaving Vitebsk, Napoleon again ordered Murat's cavalry to set the pace; a pace that was killing his army faster than the Russians could.

It was originally the intent of the Russian commanders, Barclay and Bagration to stand and fight at Vitebsk, but they could not get their forces joined.²⁷ So, while Napoleon was preparing to fight, they withdrew to the town of Smolensk on the road to Moscow. At last at Smolensk, the two Russian armies came together and engaged Napoleon in battle. Also, a new supreme commander was appointed as overall commander of the Russian forces, that man was General Kutuzov.²⁸

Smolensk was said to be the point of no return for Napoleon.²⁹ His generals suggested fortifying the town and spending the winter there recuperating from their losses and giving the replacement forces time to arrive. Napoleon disregarded their advice and continued to chase the Russians. It is curious to note here that Napoleon was extremely knowledgeable when it came to general health matters and was aware of Jenner's smallpox vaccination which he had administered to his infant son.³⁰ However, he seemed to be well aware of the fact that his army was being decimated by disease and yet he took no measures to address the issue of health. And, even though nobody understood the connection between lice and fever (typhus), it was common knowledge that lousiness was a sign of dirty habits. Napoleon could have wintered in Smolensk, had his medical staff procure potable water and provisions and resumed his march in the spring of 1813. The sanitary conditions could have been improved, after all, the Russians lived there previously with no sign of typhus, and in general his army could have been restored to a formidable fighting force by the following spring.

The Grand Army's ability to provide for itself was slowly being taken away by the Russians and the quick pace of the march and this fact was becoming more and more obvious as the army march toward Moscow. Larrey, Napoleon's Surgeon-in-Chief,

described the medical supply conditions during the battle of Smolensk quite dramatically when he reported "here, as at Vitebsk, we were very short of all kinds of materials for dressing the wounded...instead of linen dressings which we had used up the first few days, I made use of paper found in the Archives...the parchments served as splints and bandages; tow and birch cotton replaced lint, and the paper also served for bedding down the sick."³¹ It should have been plain for Napoleon to see that his army was in dire straits and he still had not engaged in his decisive battle with the Russians. It would have been prudent for him to stop for at least a short while, to allow his troops to rest and gather provisions so that they would remain a fighting force. Slowly but surely, the Emperor was allowing his army to be decimated with little influence from the enemy. Up to this point in the campaign, Napoleon has only himself and disease to blame for the casualties.

One of Napoleon's surgeons, J.R.L. de Kerckhove wrote later that "if Napoleon had been content to play this waiting game, his campaign might have been successful and his domination of central and eastern Europe permanently established."³² Instead, Napoleon attacked Smolensk and lost 8,000 men. The battle was limited mostly to an artillery duel from both sides of the Dnieper river. But still the Grand Army inflicted almost 15,000 casualties on the Russians, who lost almost twice that of the French (8,000).³³ However, Napoleon had still not achieved victory and his army was suffering more casualties from disease and stragglers.

The numbers were starting to stack up against Napoleon. Smolensk, although considered a victory, did nothing but reduce the Grand Army further. Napoleon's peace of mind at the beginning of the campaign was that he greatly outnumbered the Russians. Now, only two months into the campaign, and still having not fought a decisive battle, his

fighting force was down to approximately 148,000. A large reason for this decline in numbers was disease. And, conditions such as forced marches, lack of adequate food supplies, and potable water shortages, only predisposed the men to succumb to disease later. Having pressed this far into Russia, Napoleon was forced to leave behind detachments at most of the towns along his invasion route to protect his supply and communication lines, these detachments would be overcome by sickness and worse yet, would consume the provisions that the Army was expecting upon its return. This would be another good reason for Napoleon to wait out the winter in Smolensk and await reinforcements from the Rhineland and Germany.³⁴

The majority of Napoleon's officers were well aware of the worsening conditions faced by the army. More importantly, they knew that if they did not fight and overcome the Russians soon there would be no hope for the Grand Army. One French major, who was an aide to General Montbrun, summed it up on the march out of Smolensk by his statement that "if we don't win a battle so decisively that we capture 200 guns from the enemy, then our whole army is done for."³⁵ If Napoleon's officers were aware of the shortages and weakened state of the forces, then surely Napoleon himself must know of them. But Napoleon was not himself on this campaign. He had grown fat and somewhat lazy in his 5 years between campaigns against the Russians, and did not show himself as he was accustomed to doing in his previous campaigns. His failure to take advantage of a grand opportunity at Smolensk was eye-opening. Instead of pressing the Russians and cutting off their retreat by securing the Moscow road, he delayed his advance into Smolensk and when he resumed it, he wasted his forces on frontal assaults against the heavily fortified city.³⁶

The city was protected by an old brick wall that provided an almost impenetrable barrier to opposing forces. It stretched nearly 3 miles, was 25 feet high and 10 feet thick and had a moat before it. To this barrier, Napoleon committed his forces. The result, as could be expected, was that the French had very little success and during the night, while Napoleon regrouped, the Russians continued their retreat and left the city ablaze.³⁷ General Ney fought what was considered a successful battle against the Russian rearguard, the result of which only produced greater casualties and fewer forces to march to Moscow.³⁸

More astonishing testimony to the outstanding neglect demonstrated by Napoleon was given by a captain serving in the 7th Hussars under Murat, the King of Naples. He credited the immense wastage of the cavalry to the "selfish" attitude of the general. The cavalry crossed the Niemen with 7,500 horsemen but by the time they reached Borodino, there was less than 1,000 and according to the captain, "it was certainly not caused by the enemy's fire!"³⁹

Napoleon chose not to winter in Smolensk. Shortly after the force departed Smolensk, Davout and Murat were standing in front of Napoleon ready to duel each other over the killing pace set by Murat's cavalry yet again.⁴⁰ Napoleon broke them up and told Davout that the pace would be slowed some but afterward told Murat in secret to press as fast as he could. Why would Napoleon give such an order? It is not clear, but he was in effect reducing his forces faster than the enemy could.

Between Smolensk and the town of Borodino, Napoleon lost another 18,000 men.⁴¹ A few miles from the town he had his generals take roll because he was generally aware of his end strength, but he had no concrete numbers with which to draw up battle plans.

Later, on August 19th, a French sergeant observed General Wrede walking toward the front because he was suffering from diarrhea and could not go horseback.⁴² He was taken aback because here was a general officer whose needs were supposed to be well taken care of, suffering like a common soldier. But, at this period during the march the entire army suffered unspeakably from this epidemic.⁴³ As the army moved forward, they saw rotting corpses of men and horses, and there was no food except for the “wretched” meat that was gathered wherever it could be found. This meat may have satisfied some hunger but it more than likely caused more cases of dysentery and diarrhea than anything else. Sergeant Josef Schrafel described what it was like foraging near Smolensk. “Many soldiers went into the woods in search of roots and plants, but these were often harmful and caused illness and madness...the most serious shortage was water. We had to fetch the water we needed from a large pool which had a brownish color and teemed with thousands of tiny worms. This produced more illness.”⁴⁴

The shortage of water was of primary importance, yet Napoleon seemed to not care. His army was marching on the sandy, dusty road to Moscow, which caused the men to become covered in dust. This only aggravated their already intense thirst and some men were even seen “lying on their bellies, to drink horse’s urine from the gutters.”⁴⁵ This of course, only served to make the problem worse, but still Napoleon pressed on as if the only thing that mattered was getting to Moscow.

On 02 September, he halted the march so that the men could prepare for battle and get a well deserved break. There were a few skirmishes before the final decisive battle on 07 September, but none compared to the battle that was about to occur.

Borodino

The battle of Borodino was the culminating point of the campaign for Napoleon. By this point, Napoleon's Grand Army had been decimated by disease and his own health was poor. He lost almost half of his main force and typhus was still making its way through the ranks.⁴⁶ On 05 September, two days before the most vicious battle of the campaign, Napoleon had approximately 130,000 men. He was opposed by 120,000 Russian troops under the command of General Kutusov, but about 10,000 of these men were hastily thrown together from the city's inhabitants. His aide-de-camp, General Rapp answered Napoleon bluntly when the Emperor asked if he thought it would be a successful day; he replied "There is no doubt about it, sire. We have used up all our resources, and have simply got to win...(Napoleon replied) The poor army is sadly depleted, but what remains is good. And my guard is intact."⁴⁷ This is proof that Napoleon knew his army had suffered greatly during the campaign, but he only saw that Moscow was nearly at his fingertips and he was not about to stop now.

Napoleon tried to rally his troops before the fight. He inspired in them the hope that with a victory they could winter in Moscow, enjoy the spoils from the city, and return home before Christmas. This gave the soldiers renewed faith that these things may indeed still be within reach. It was at this time that Napoleon was afflicted with a severe cold. He was simply not a fit leader during this battle. He was suffering from an acute case of cystitis, an inflammation of the bladder, and had extreme difficulty passing water.⁴⁸ He had caught an awful cold and suffered with an extremely high fever. What effect did this have on Napoleon? There were several major decisions that had to be made and Napoleon struggled to make them. Count de Segur observed Napoleon during

a reconnaissance try to cool his highly fevered forehead by placing it in on the cold barrel of a field cannon. He was suffering from several ailments. His personal physician, Mestivier, recorded that

he had a persistent dry cough, difficult irregular breathing, his urine came only in drops and with pain and was thick with sediment. His legs and feet were extremely edematous, the pulse febrile in type and intermittent every twelve beats or so and that these symptoms suggested the presence of edema of the chest... Dr. Yvan also noted that the Emperor was exhausted physically and mentally.⁴⁹

It was clear that Napoleon was literally in no shape to lead his army at this crucial battle, he had in fact, even lost his voice so that in order to give orders during the battle, he was forced to write them down. Due to his terrible handwriting, he added confusion to the "fog of war" on the battlefield⁵⁰. The telltale signs of his decreased faculties were present. As the cannonade began the morning of the 7th, the artillery realized that they were positioned too far from the target and the guns had to be move forward. It took them about 30 minutes to adjust almost 100 guns after which they were effective, but this was a mistake Napoleon would have caught in his earlier years and in healthier days. Throughout much of the Russian campaign, Napoleon was not a visible leader. He delegated orders from his tent and only on rare occasions did he venture out to see the action⁵¹. This was in contrast to the Napoleon of old who was known to visit the troops at all hours of the day and night and was always visible during the heated moments of battle, offering encouragement to his men.⁵²

Another bit of evidence that supports Napoleon's deteriorated condition was the fact that he dismissed Davout's proposed course of action of encircling the Russians by attacking the left flank and instead chose the direct frontal assault with cavalry: a move that proved costly, as all frontal assaults do.

Probably the greatest point of contention during the battle of Borodino, was Napoleon's refusal to employ his imperial guard at a point in the battle when the Grand Army appeared to be within reach of smashing the stubborn Russian forces. The battle had raged for nearly 12 hours and the French had gained only a mile of ground. Finally, after an exhaustive effort, Davout had removed the Russians from their entrenched positions and was within grasp of victory but his troops and horses were exhausted⁵³. He called for Napoleon to deploy his imperial guard which would have enabled the French to finish the Russians in a great decisive battle (Napoleon's original strategy) but he refused to commit his guard. Several times during the ferocious fighting Napoleon's generals begged him to commit his imperial guard and every time he denied their requests saying "If I throw in the guard, with what shall I fight tomorrow?"⁵⁴ His staff was dismayed to find the Emperor so withdrawn and apathetic. "By mid day the Russian position had been forced into a concave shape, but Napoleon's reluctance to commit the guard afforded Kutusov with just enough time to reinforce the most threatened sectors of his line."⁵⁵ If this was to be the decisive victory that Napoleon thought it was going to be, then the Russians would have been defeated and there would be no enemy to fight tomorrow. Indeed, even the Russian General Barclay de Tolly, could not understand "why Napoleon did not exploit his victory, for he had in fact already gained possession of the principal points of the battlefield."⁵⁶ Some writers argued that this was a blessing in disguise as the Imperial Guard was the only fighting force available during the retreat from Moscow. But again, if the Russians had been defeated at Borodino, instead of being allowed to withdraw with 90,000 troops, there would have been no need for the Guard during the retreat. Even Kutusov, the Russian general, knew that the only hope Mother

Russia had for victory lay in the army. In Kutusov's eyes "as long as the Russian Army continued to exist, hope of winning the war would be preserved, whereas to risk destruction of the army, was to risk all."⁵⁷ In all likelihood, there probably would not have been a retreat if Napoleon had committed his Imperial Guard at the crucial moment of the battle of Borodino. Having smashed the Russian army and cut off its retreat, he could have delegated peace terms to Alexander. The fact remained that the Russian army, the last hope of Russia, was still intact and still a viable force.

The results of the battle were appalling. The Russians lost an estimated 45,000 men whereas the French casualties were somewhere between 28,000-31,000 including 47 Generals, of which 16 were killed.⁵⁸ Segur wrote "The losses were immense and out of proportion to the result. Everyone...wept for some dead friend...What mourning in Paris; what a triumph for the enemy; what a dangerous subject for thought in Germany."⁵⁹ There was no sign of rejoicing from the French soldiers and the officers knew that the victory was hollow. They had just lost approximately 30,000 men, which reduced their numbers by almost one-fourth and the Russians, though suffering more losses, were not 1200 miles from home and could more easily replenish their losses. They also were not an army being ravaged by disease, hunger and thirst which only exacerbated the effects of the diseases on them. None the less, Napoleon declared the battle a victory. Still, the finger points back to Napoleon's decision not to employ his guard and "his ill health does much to explain...his remarkable lack of energy throughout the day. His illness made him both fretful and excessively cautious."⁶⁰ This decision making by Napoleon was of concern to all those officers around him. Colonel Lejeune after the battle, sat and reflected upon past battles and surprised himself at the realization

that during this battle he had not seen the Emperor out and about during the fighting, displaying his usual energetic personality upon the rank and file⁶¹. He wrote in his memoirs "We did not know that Napoleon was unwell, and this type of illness made it impossible for him, in the great events which were unfolding before his eyes, to act solely in the interests of his glory."⁶²

Notes

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² Cartwright, Frederick F. *Disease and History*, New York, Crowell, 1972, p 90

³ Connelly, Owen, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns*, Wilmington, DE, Scholarly Resources, 1987, p 137

⁴ Connelly, p 140

⁵ Connelly, p 142

⁶ Brett-James, p 3

⁷ Chandler, David G. *The Campaigns of Napoleon*, New York, MacMillan Co., 1966, p 758

⁸ Brett-James, p 50

⁹ Brett-James p 52

¹⁰ Brett-James p 53

¹¹ Brett-James p 48

¹² Brett-James p 49

¹³ Major, Ralph H. *Disease and Destiny*, Lawrence, Kansas, U of Kansas Press, 1967, p 13

¹⁴ Brett-James, p 55

¹⁵ Brett-James p 56

¹⁶ Brett-James, p 55

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¹⁸ Brett-James p 57

¹⁹ Brett-James, p 59

²⁰ Brett-James p 60

²¹ Brett-James p 63

²² Brett-James p 65

²³ Connelly, p 161

²⁴ Connelly, p 163

²⁵ Cartwright, p 92

²⁶ Chandler, p 780

²⁷ Chandler, 801

²⁸ Chandler, 789

²⁹ Chandler, p 781

³⁰ Cartwright, p 104

Notes

- ³¹ Brett-James, p 96
- ³² Cartwright, p 96
- ³³ Chandler, p 791
- ³⁴ Brett-James, p 98
- ³⁵ Brett-James, p 99
- ³⁶ Connelly, p 175
- ³⁷ Connelly, p 177
- ³⁸ Connelly p 179
- ³⁹ Brett-James, p 99
- ⁴⁰ Brett-James p 100
- ⁴¹ Brett-James p 101
- ⁴² Brett-James p 101
- ⁴³ Brett-James, p 102
- ⁴⁴ Brett-James, p 103
- ⁴⁵ Brett-James, p 108
- ⁴⁶ Brett-James p 109
- ⁴⁷ Brett-James, p 120
- ⁴⁸ Delderfield, R.F., *The Retreat from Moscow*, New York, Atheneum, 1967, p 61
- ⁴⁹ Delderfield, p 62
- ⁵⁰ Cartwright, p 95
- ⁵¹ Chandler, p 800
- ⁵² Chandler, p 801
- ⁵³ Chandler, p 803
- ⁵⁴ Cartwright, p 96
- ⁵⁵ Chandler, p 804
- ⁵⁶ Brett-James, p 132
- ⁵⁷ Brett-James, p 144
- ⁵⁸ Chandler, p 806
- ⁵⁹ Connelly, p 171
- ⁶⁰ Chandler, p 807
- ⁶¹ Brett-James p 131
- ⁶² Brett-James. P 132

Chapter 3

Moscow

It was 75 miles from Borodino to Moscow, and Napoleon's Army, made the journey in a week's time arriving at the Gates of the Holy City on 14 September. Napoleon expected a hero's welcome, the logic here is hard to discern, and was surprised to find the gates barred and the city almost completely deserted. At Moscow, the men of the Grand Army were utterly exhausted by the campaign and were riddled with disease. Typhus and dysentery ran through the ranks like wildfire and he arrived at Moscow with less than 100,000 troops.¹ While resting in the city and waiting for Alexander's peace proposal, typhus took a greater toll on the remaining forces, such that, even with 15,000 replacements, the fighting strength of the Grand Army was not increased due to the almost equal number of deaths from disease.² Of the more than 300,000 who had gathered with or reinforced Napoleon, only approximately 90,000 made it to Moscow, 70% had fallen out prior to Moscow.³

Napoleon wasted an entire month lounging in Moscow reading books and playing cards with his officers.⁴ He ignored warnings from his officers that the Russian prisoners had expressed, which foretold the quickly approaching cold months.⁵ Was Napoleon still feeling the effects of the sickness that assailed him at Borodino? The Russian prisoners gave warning "that in a fortnight your nails will drop off and your weapons will drop

from your benumbed and half-dead fingers” Napoleon’s reply was a disbelieving “Bah!, You and your natives! See how fine it is.”⁶ Even after all the bad decisions he had made thus far, Napoleon could have extricated his remaining forces from Russia if he had only realized that the delay in Moscow was hurting his already depleted army and providing a chance for the Russians to regroup and move to cut off his escape route.⁷ If it were not for the attack on Murat’s cavalry by Bennigsen on 18 October, Napoleon may have waited entirely too long dooming his entire army. As it was, the battle cost Murat approximately 2,500 men and had it not been for Kutusov refusing to send reinforcements, Murat may have been destroyed completely.⁸

On 19 October, 1812, Napoleon began his famous retreat from Moscow. He left behind an estimated 12,000 sick and wounded most of whom were killed by the returning Russians.⁹ His army was now outnumbered and at its farthest advance into Russia. Those who weren’t killed outright by the Russians died agonizing deaths from typhus. An eyewitness account tells the tale:

I had myself carried into one of the soldier’s rooms and there, sword in hand, I gave the fire orders. My illness was at its height, and I was delirious...After this the typhus made appalling inroads in our ranks. We were 43 officers in our ward. All of them died...from this dreadful disease...Only three of us survived. Among the soldiers the proportions were similar, more than 1,800 of 1,850 in the hospital died.¹⁰

Such was the start of the retreat from Moscow.

His original return route was not a bad choice, it included going south before reaching the supply depot at Smolensk. This would carry him back through territory that was not devastated by the ingress march and would have provided more provisions for his army. However, his delay in Moscow allowed the Russians to mass at Maloyaroslavets and inflict punishing losses on the Italian contingent of the Grand Army

in a short but decisive battle.¹¹ This battle caused Napoleon to call a council upon which it was decided to return through Borodino to Smolensk. The obvious disadvantage was that the Army would have to pass through towns littered with corpses and infested with typhus carrying lice, not to mention that the weather was turning colder and food was still scarce. This route afforded no new forage areas for the army.

The retreat was disastrous for the Grand Army and its ranks were cut in half from Moscow to Smolensk. Discipline had deteriorated to the point that Napoleon realized he could not winter in Smolensk so he took his lead elements and proceeded to Vilna.¹² It is interesting to note that on the march toward Moscow, Napoleon was always far to the rear, but on the retreat he was well in front. At this point, Napoleon's greatest concern was to preclude any disastrous political ramifications resulting from the campaign. Rather than seeing his army home.

Vilna was not a pretty sight. Roughly 20,000 men were left of the fighting force and "of Ney's Third Corps, only 20 men remained."¹³ The town offered no relief...it was crowded with sick, typhus had spread throughout the surrounding countryside. Men suffering from typhus fever, dysentery, and pneumonia lay on rotten straw soaked with their own excrement."¹⁴ Typhus had ravaged the Grand Army from the moment it began its fateful campaign and hounded it throughout, as did dysentery, diphtheria, pneumonia and other infectious diseases. This was not to be the end of the tale, the returning soldiers infected the civilian populations upon their return and massive epidemics ensued. Napoleon's Russian invasion, started mostly because of his own grand schemes and ego, was responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths.¹⁵

The Russian Strategy

Napoleon's defeat can not be credited to the Russian strategy. The two Russian generals, Barclay and Bagration, did not intend to delay fighting until Borodino, it simply turned out that way. Lack of communication and outright enmity between the two caused the Russian forces to remain separated until Borodino.¹⁶ In fact, at Smolensk, Bagration moved his army toward Moscow with no regard to Barclay's intentions, in essence leaving him to fight alone. The Russians were actually considering going on the offensive, but either miscommunication, or no communication between Barclay and Bagration, caused the Russian War Minister to delay and when he did decide to advance, it was a haphazard attempt and easily repulsed by the French.¹⁷ As it turned out, Alexander showed some wisdom by appointing Kutusov as commander-in-chief of the entire Russian army as he advocated continuing the retreat, vice making a stand at the gates of Moscow.¹⁸ Had Barclay and Bagration remained in charge, Napoleon may have been able to defeat them at Moscow.

The heralded "scorched earth" policy was a factor, but not an overall show-stopping tactic.¹⁹ It would have slowed down Napoleon if he had let it, but he simply chose to drive his army thinking that he had enough numbers to defeat the Russians when the decisive battle did finally arrive. Napoleon could have stopped at several occasions to allow for gathering of much needed provisions and allow for his sick to recover. The Russians had not shown any offensive tendencies, except for some scattered Cossack raids,²⁰ and if Napoleon had become defensive for just a short while he could have defeated the Russians in the end. As Clausewitz wrote, "It is easier to hold ground than take it."²¹ Also, he made the point that since Napoleon had lost so many men on his

march to Moscow, that "even if the Russians had not followed up with their own counteroffensive, they would have been secure from any fresh invasion for a long time to come."²²

Napoleon's subordinates were to blame for some tactical errors, and even some communication (or lack thereof) problems, but they were more than adequate to carry out his orders and achieve victory over the Russians. It was Ney who fought most valiantly throughout the campaign and who pleaded for Napoleon to commit his guard at the culminating point of the Battle of Borodino.²³ His leadership was more inspirational than the great Emperor Napoleon's because he did not have all the political baggage to worry about that Napoleon did. Also, Davout gave prudent tactical advice to Napoleon at Borodino by suggesting an envelopment of the Russians by attacking their left flank instead of the costly frontal assault.²⁴ Napoleon disregarded this advice and suffered terrible casualties. Thus, his subordinates were more than adequate and certainly could not be blamed for the debacle that the Russian campaign turned out to be.

No, the truth is that disease plainly and clearly, destroyed Napoleon's army. He left Europe with 490,00 men in his main army. He lost 8,000 men at Smolensk and, at the most, 31,000 at Borodino. It is impossible to determine how many were lost due to the various weather conditions, hunger, and thirst, but he arrived at Moscow with at most 100,000 men.²⁵ If one counts the number of troops left behind to guard the supply depots, and many of these were infected with typhus by the time Napoleon returned, there are still some 300,000 men laid low or killed by disease.²⁶ There is no denying the fact that disease took away his overwhelming superiority of numbers and attacked him personally at Borodino incapacitating him at the most crucial point of the campaign.²⁷

Napoleon could not be blamed for the onset of typhus, for never before in his experience had the French armies encountered such an epidemic. To say that Napoleon should have planned for this would be ludicrous. However, to hold him responsible for not taking corrective action when it was plain to see that his forces were suffering terribly, is completely appropriate

Napoleon's pride was apparent in his remarks to the Kings of Denmark and Norway when he wrote "My losses are real but the enemy can take no credit for them."²⁸ He was not accepting responsibility for the almost total annihilation of his army, he was simply saying that his strategy and tactics were not to blame for the defeat. Here, he was correct. It was not his tactics, nor his grand strategy, it was the combined effects of typhus, dysentery, and other infectious diseases. His logistic strategy could be faulted as he failed to prepare for a winter campaign and he made relatively few preparations for adequate medical supplies and hospitals.

So What?

Disease was the primary cause of Napoleon's downfall during his Russian campaign. It directly affected a large percentage of his forces and indirectly affected the rest. He could have done many things to alleviate the effects of the sickness but chose not to. His supply lines were secure, but they also harbored the sickness so that reinforcements travelling to join his main force contracted the various illnesses. Also, the depots he established on the march to Moscow became their own Petri dishes that kept the disease alive and more readily contagious. The losses Napoleon suffered at the hands of the Russians were a mere percentage of the casualties caused by disease.²⁹ From the

evidence, it appears that Napoleon lost approximately 41,000 troops to combat and approximately 200,000 to disease. This was almost half of his French army in Russia.

The evidence, in the form of eyewitness accounts and professional opinion (Clausewitz), points to the fact that the Grand Army was defeated in Russia, because of the deleterious effects of infectious disease upon it. Why is this important to the modern day military planner and leader? It is important because infectious disease will always be present in the world. Not only can bacteria and viruses mutate into newer, more virulent strains, they (bacteria) can develop resistance to the primary form of treatment; antibiotics. Thus, a seemingly harmless infection today could become an uncontrollable, incapacitating disease tomorrow.

Today's soldier must be ready to deploy anywhere in the world. Recent deployments to Somalia and Bosnia, not to mention NEO operations in Liberia, are just a few examples. These places may harbor diseases that are foreign to our forces and may cause overwhelming damage to fighting strength and morale. Already AIDS has become a major factor in the lives of almost every person in the world. The rate of infection in many areas, (Thailand, East Africa) is so great that placing military forces there could be more dangerous than bullets and bombs. The AIDS pandemic has slowed but not abated. The National Center for Infectious Disease predicts that 9 million deaths will occur in 15 African countries by the year 2005 from AIDS.³⁰

In many instances, U.S. military forces are asked to conduct Peace-keeping operations which involve an extended stay in a given area. This may lead to epidemics that could severely hamper, if not eliminate, our ability to carry out these operations. With diseases such as the Hantavirus, and the even deadlier Ebola virus, the possibility of

an outbreak is hard to predict. Often these diseases flare up for seemingly unknown reasons and kill and incapacitate its victims before they can be contained.

The other major threat to our military forces is that of biological weapons. The U.S. has a good intelligence network and the finest medical facilities in the world, but nobody can be certain of what U.S. forces will face in the event they must deploy against unstable regimes. The Gulf War is a prime example. Soldiers came home complaining of various ailments that could not be explained. What if the numbers infected were much greater? Could the coalition forces have defeated Saddam Hussein without the ground forces? It is doubtful.

Today's military leaders and planners cannot foresee every type of disease in every campaign plan, but if an epidemic did occur, a plan to deal with it must be developed and implemented. The cost of treating AIDS patients alone may become so great that it affects defense budget issues and leaving less money to buy and procure new weapons systems.

Microorganisms have the uncanny ability to change and adapt enabling them to survive under various circumstances.³¹ Even the simple cold viruses can become deadly if they infect an already distressed body. The priority for planners and logisticians is to ensure that U.S. forces receive the best care, including vaccinations, food, and potable water, that is available, to ensure that they are effective fighting forces and can remain so.

Notes

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² Chandler , p 805

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Notes

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- ⁶ Brett-James, p 147
- ⁷ Brett-James, p 150
- ⁸ Chandler, p 807
- ⁹ Chandler, p 809
- ¹⁰ Brett-James p 209
- ¹¹ Chandler, p 808
- ¹² Chandler, p 810
- ¹³ Brett-James, p 211
- ¹⁴ Cartwright, p 101
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- ¹⁶ Chandler, p 818
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- ¹⁸ Chandler, p 820
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- ²⁰ Chandler, p 823
- ²¹ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, New Jersey, Princeton Press, 1976, p 357
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- ²³ Chandler, p 782
- ²⁴ Chandler, p 801
- ²⁵ Chandler, p 756
- ²⁶ Delderfield, R.F. *The Retreat from Moscow* New York, Atheneum, 1967, p 279
- ²⁷ Brett-James, p 104
- ²⁸ Delderfield, p 288
- ²⁹ Brett-James, p 133
- ³⁰ National Center for Infectious Disease @ www.cdc.gov/ncidod/ncid.htm
- ³¹ Microsoft-Encarta Encyclopedia, 1996

Chapter 4

Conclusion

No matter whose statistics one studies, the conclusion is the same. Napoleon lost approximately one third of his army to disease.¹ This alone brought the number of his army to equal that of the Russians by mid august. At Smolensk, Napoleon outnumbered the Russians by about 1.5:1. By Moscow, he was less than 1:1. Every military commander knows that with those numbers, one does not attack, or go on the offensive, yet this is exactly what Napoleon did. His actions could be explained in many ways, but the primary reason he let his army die in front of his own eyes was because his thoughts were on much grander things. He saw himself as the conqueror and emperor of the entire continent and his many previous military victories gave him a sense of invulnerability. The truth is that his tactics and strategy had not changed and those who defeated him in the end had learned from either their own, or other general's, mistakes. A final quote summarizes the essence of Napoleon's attitude a few months after the Russian debacle. In speaking to Metternich he said "A man such as I am not concerned over the lives of a million men."² This is only too obvious when one reads the account of the Russian Campaign of 1812. Today's and tomorrow's military and political leaders must concern themselves with the lives of millions of men and women.

The microbial enemies of Napoleon's army are still present today in many parts of the world. The same dangerous typhus that plagued Napoleon is ubiquitous in Africa, Haiti, and other underdeveloped countries. The National Center for Infectious Disease says that the organisms that cause malaria, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, pneumonia, middle ear infections, diarrheal diseases, and hospital acquired infections, are becoming more drug resistant³. This results in treatment that requires much more powerful and expensive antibiotics and if treatment is delayed or unavailable the chances of death increase dramatically.

Also, dangerous viruses like Ebola and Hantavirus pose tremendous threats to U.S. forces in many parts of the world including the United States and many parts of South America⁴. The most important thing to note about Ebola is that the natural host is unknown! In outbreaks in Zaire in 1976 and 1995 the mortality rates were 62% and 65% respectively⁵. The hantavirus outbreak in the southwestern U.S. in 1993 had a 48% fatality rate. This is strikingly familiar. Napoleon's army had an advanced medical professional staff but was facing a disease that it knew nothing about (typhus). The United States Army today is the most advanced in the world yet it still must face enemies, in the form of microbes, that it does not fully understand (Ebola).

The policy makers and planners of today's military must take these facts into account and decide if U.S. National Military and Security Strategy warrant the use of U.S. armed forces in these parts of the world in a humanitarian role.

Notes

¹ Brett-James, , Antony, *1812. Eyewitness Accounts of Napoleon's Defeat in Russia*, New York, St Marten's Press, 1966, p 255

² Brett-James, p 265

³ National Center for Infectious Disease @ www.cdc.gov/ncidod/ncid.htm

Notes

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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